

Testimony of Sheena Graham
Before the Education Committee

Re: HB 6884 An Act Concerning the Recruitment, Retention, and Enhancement of the Teaching Profession
March 15, 2023

Good afternoon, Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty, and members of the Education Committee.

I testify today in support of House Bill 6884. This bill takes important steps toward addressing the educator shortage in Connecticut, showing educators that theirs is a respected profession, and ensuring that our classrooms and schools can provide the best possible education for our students.

My name is Sheena Graham. I am a recently retired public school educator who taught for 38.8 years, 17.3 years on the elementary level and 21.5 as a high school educator. I am Connecticut's 2019 Teacher of the Year. Thank you for considering HB 6884 (An Act Concerning the Recruitment, Retention, and Enhancement of the Teaching Profession).

There are three areas of this bill that I would personally like to address: a duty-free prep time, the Educator Bill of Rights, and a minimum teacher salary.

Uninterrupted duty-free prep time would allow each educator time for planning, instructional preparation, evaluating students' work, making parental contact, and taking care of other issues related to students at their discretion. I stress the word uninterrupted because, as an elementary educator, I don't ever remember consistently having 30 minutes to prep. Often my time was hijacked by administrators for meetings, group sessions and/or providing coverage. I was not unique; this was standard practice. An educator should not be required to participate in any other activity during this prep time. Not lunch duty, covering a class or office, or proctoring a test. An educator without duty-free prep time is an educator with no time to prepare for his/her students and one that is being set up to fail, suffer unnecessary stress or leave the profession. Imagine if a nurse practitioner had no prep time in between the patient before you and you. Yet they were being evaluated on cleanliness and proper procedures. They would not pass. That standard would never be allowed in the medical field or anywhere else. It should not be allowed in education either.

This is not a request for free time when employees could leave campus or engage in non-school related activities. While it does not prohibit a teacher from volunteering to participate in a meeting or planning session during their planning period, undue pressure by administration or the district should not be put on any teacher to do so.

That brings me to the Educator Bill of Rights. I support the request for all BOEs to adopt an Educator Bill of Rights. Support in this area for educators is integral to being able to retain teachers after recruiting them. In my personal experience, I have not worked in an environment free from threats or harassment. It was made clear early on in my career that reporting incidents regarding student behaviors, lack of materials to teach a course, and/or questioning a lack of discipline building wide was met with retaliation. The types of punishments I have experienced or witnessed include: the loss of a classroom the following year, sometimes mid-year, a change in the courses you will teach (your schedule is given to someone else), a class list of all the toughest students to deal with, calls for assistance go unanswered, the worst possible equipment for your students and the list goes on. It is unacceptable. In addition to that, educators must be free to choose the materials that are pedagogically sound and related to the well-being of their students. I received the following from Jason, one of my former students:

“Ms. Sheena Graham is the most impactful teacher I had in my K-12 experience! Going into her Black history choral class and gospel choir my senior year was life saving for me! I dealt with a lot of anxiety and depression which led to an attempted suicide early into the school year. But upon returning to school, I knew that there was a lot of joy in her classes and groups! I received so much **love and support** from Ms. Graham. Even through her own life struggles, she created an environment of support and encouragement in her classroom which gave **a sense of belonging**. Daily, I was reminded that **I was a vital part** to not only her class but the choir and what we strived to accomplish. There was **unity** in her classroom and even after we left the classroom.”

I could not have created the safe environment this young man needed without having the ability to choose the appropriate material for my students. That should not be taken away from any educator. We have professionally been trained and should be treated and paid as professionals.

Establishing a minimum teacher salary of 4x FPL for a family of 1 (\$58,320) is a step in that direction. Speaking out concerning HB 6884 forces me to face harsh realities publicly that I have often tried to minimize. No educator should have to choose between being able to take care of and support their own children and their calling, their passion for educating the children of Connecticut. My choice to be and remain an underpaid public school educator in an underfunded district, as the single mom of two; led to choiceless sacrifices for my daughter and son. Being paid less than a professional has meant having to work more than one job, and as many as four jobs, my entire teaching career. Imagine leaving a school with lights on to go home to darkness, or a building with heat to go to a home that is ice cold. Imagine having to choose between caring for ill parents or providing for my children. These are all conditions that are not retention friendly. My children are now 33 and 25 and we have never been on a family vacation. On my salary as a divorced single parent, that would have been considered a luxury; we could barely deal with necessities.

As time goes by, it will get harder to keep educators in this state, especially in the neediest districts. At any time stepping across city lines meant upping my salary from \$10,000 to as much as \$25,000 more a year! In closing, "It is long past time for CT to take care of educators. We are not just taking care of **your** children, we have taken care of **you**, and every person you rely on in your daily lives." **You can't retain what you don't maintain** seems easy to understand when we're talking about a lawn or equipment. It's true for educators also. Uninterrupted duty-free prep time along with the Educator Bill of Rights are two integral steps towards meeting teacher's physical needs. A minimum starting salary begins to address their financial ones. HB 6884 is a step in that direction that suggests you value the voice of educators. Supporting, as I do, the appointing of two non-voting teachers to the SBOE and the formation of a Teacher Advisory Committee to guide the CSDE in the implementation of education policies will go a long way towards proving it.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Length, times, and districts of service.

(2.3)	March	1983	June	1985	Bridgeport
(2)	September	1985	June	1987	Ansonia
(34.5)	September	1987	January	2022	Bridgeport

Elementary (17.3) High school (21.5)